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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000428

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/27/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)  
SUBJECT: THE GESTATION OF A NEW ISLAMIST PARTY

REF: 08 ALGIERS 617

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Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: In what appears to be a government-backed effort to energize an alienated Islamist electorate, the traditional tensions within the Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP - Muslim Brotherhood) have sprouted a new formal political movement, the Movement for Preaching and Change (MPC). The MPC has issued a founding statement, opened a party headquarters in Algiers and offices in over 20 wilayas across the country, and recruited several thousand followers. Led by Abdelmadjid Menasra, chief rival of MSP leader Aboudjerra Soltani, the MPC also boasts several key figures originally aligned with MSP founder Cheikh Mahfoudh Nahnah in the early 1990s. While the MPC has not yet formally applied to the Interior Ministry for official recognition as a new political party, an MPC source tells us they will do so within the next month or two. Tacit government support and press coverage of the emerging movement suggest the MPC will be recognized, provided it remains within the political redlines established by the government. The process, according to one consultant, is consistent with the government pattern of dividing and co-opting Islamists safely inside the political arena, a pattern that began with the MSP decision to survive as part of the government following the cancellation of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) election victories in 1991-92 and the civil war that ensued. END SUMMARY.

BORN WITH A MUSTACHE  
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12. (C) During the second week of April, the Algerian press again featured front page headlines of a "divorce" between the Soltani and Menasra camps within the MSP. The essence of the split, which surfaces in the press every few months (reftel), is a battle to control the initial MSP balance struck by Nahnah between staying in government and playing the role of moderate Islamist opposition. According to MSP Senator Farid Hebbaz, who is part of the nascent MPC leadership, Soltani has compromised too much with President Bouteflika's government and obtained a limited series of ministerial posts and other political spoils at the expense of pushing Islamist values into Algeria's political debate. Hebbaz told us on April 20 that the core MPC movement consists of over 40 resigned MSP members, several thousand MSP loyalists across the country, and that this time the internal division was likely to result in the formation of a new party "well before Ramadan." Rabah Abdellah, journalist at French-language daily Le Soir d'Algerie, called the MPC the latest in a series of political parties "born with a

mustache" -- a popular Algerian expression for political parties that spring fully-formed from existing parties and offer new packaging but little new substance. Political consultant Mounir Guerbi explained that the expression came into popular usage when the National Democratic Rally (RND) was created in 1997 from elements of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in a concerted attempt to create the appearance of an enlarged political space while maintaining government control over its activities.

#### A CAREFUL CALCULATION

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¶3. (C) Hebbaz conceded that the MPC was designed not only to siphon support from Soltani's MSP, but also to weaken the potential impact of opposition Islamist leader Abdellah Djaballah. Djaballah founded the Nahda party at the outset of the multi-party system in 1989, but the party was then split through government interference, leading Djaballah to found the slightly more radical Islamist Movement for National Reform, Islah, in 1999. Again through an internal party dispute that the government encouraged, Islah was split in two, with Djaballah left on the outside without a party by early 2008. Djaballah himself was a candidate for president against Bouteflika in both 1999 and 2004 but refused to participate in the 2009 elections, stating publicly he believed them to be rigged. According to Guerbi, the government was concerned primarily about growing political apathy among Islamists, and worried that it did not present a viable Islamist candidate in the 2009 presidential election to give the process greater credibility. Consequently, he said, the government decided to allow Djaballah to fuse Islah and Nahda into a new (as yet unrecognized) party known as "Historical Nahda," with Djaballah returning after the

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elections to lead what appeared to be a rejuvenated version of his original party. Abdellah pointed out on April 27 that the timing of the MPC launch was no accident, and that "the political adventure of Menasra and his supporters would never have gotten this far without support from the government." On April 27, Soltani formally resigned his post as Minister of State without Portfolio, while the same day's edition of Le Soir d'Algerie featured Soltani publicly accusing Interior Minister Nouredine Zerhouni of being responsible for splitting the MSP.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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¶4. (C) The MPC, Hebbaz explained, was designed to entice Islamists into the formal political system, but without going into the formal opposition many hard-line Islamists seek. Hebbaz told us that the split from Soltani represented a struggle for the true legacy of Nahnah, who died in 2003. According to Hebbaz, Nahnah's status as a master politician enabled him to maintain Islamist legitimacy within Algeria and ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in other countries, all under the protective umbrella of the government. Hebbaz asserted that the MPC in no way intended to withdraw from the government, saying survival as a political entity "would be impossible" under such conditions, and "they would never allow it." He said that the MPC planned to seek formal status as a political party within the next two months, but no decision had yet been made on whether the MPC would attempt to be a formal part of the presidential ruling coalition, which currently consists of the MSP, RND and FLN.

¶5. (C) While Menasra has been the figurehead of the MPC movement, Hebbaz explained that two other individuals with close personal ties to Cheikh Nahnah in the early 1990s were the true leaders of the movement. Mustapha Belmehdi, one of the founding members of the MSP and a close confidant of Nahnah, is the author of the 10-point founding manifesto of the MPC. In addition to Belmehdi, Abdelkader Bengrina, former Minister of Tourism from 1997-1999, is another

well-known former close advisor to Nahnah. Lacking the public relations skills of Menasra, Bengrina is known as a skilled politician well versed in the inner machinery of the MSP since its founding. The Nahnah name, explained Guerbi, is a badge of legitimacy in Algerian political Islam, and the presence of Belmehdi and Bengrina within the MPC represents "a significant blow" to the MSP. In addition, the use of the term "Preaching" (Da'awa) is a seductive political tool, said Guerbi, as it evoked the terrorist organization Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, renamed Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007), and could therefore induce some more hard-nosed Islamists into the government-controlled political tent.

COMMENT

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16. (C) The gestation of a new Islamist party in Algeria is nothing new. It is the tried and true pattern of the Algerian regime to ensure that in post-FIS Algeria, no Islamist party will ever gain a level of support the government cannot control. As journalist Abdellah indicated, there is some merit to Soltani's April 27 press statements: the MPC will receive legal status if and only if the Algerian government is satisfied that it will remain within its assigned political space, siphoning support from Djaballah and MSP along the way. The intended result is greater overall Islamist participation in the political system, fragmented between the MSP, MPC and Djaballah. Soltani is correct in saying that Zerhouni and his ministry control the issuance of legal status for any association, but in the case of political Islam, the decision to repeat the effective divide-and-conquer measures of the past is almost certainly the result of lengthy larger discussions among the various actors within the Algerian leadership.

PEARCE